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ABSTRACT

The authors discuss areas of concern in the integration of the mentally retarded into the regular classroom. Considered are such issues as program emphasis on competitive jobs versus work in a sheltered environment, recreational possibilities, the quality of institutional care as it relates to institution size, and regular classes versus special classes for retarded children. (Author/SBH)

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A B S T R A C T

INTEGRATION OF THE MENTALLY RETARDED IN SOCIETY: THEIR WISH OR OURS?

Is integration into regular classes the only sound formula or have special classes some value for retarded children? Should emphasis be laid on the provision of competitive jobs for adolescents or is work in a sheltered environment indispensable? Does the same recreational possibilities as for non-handicapped persons really mean relaxing leisure-time for retarded persons? Does the quality of a residential institution really depend mainly on its size? Which way will lead our retarded fellow-men to a happy life in human dignity?

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INTEGRATION OF THE MENTALLY RETARDED IN SOCIETY: THEIR WISH OR OURS?

Social integration of the retarded is in our days a major concern of all well-meaning people who are concerned with the problems of mental retardation. But there are basic disagreements about what this means.

Already at the stage of child-education there is disagreement. Some experts consider that the only sound formula is to integrate them into ordinary classes, where children are expected to have more or less the same level of intelligence, of social behaviour, of senso-motoric and emotional development. Retarded children do not meet these standards as all of us know. They have other needs and other possibilities as the rest of the group.

This is not a new discovery. Already our own teachers recognized the need for special programs for those, who could not keep up with the others. Around the turn of the century special classes for the handicapped were set up in most Western countries, because experience proved that if a school-class was to accept children with all kinds and all degrees of handicaps, there is soon such a mixture of different abilities in each class, that neither the weaker nor the stronger can be helped.

Unfortunately we had to realize that even the best special classes could not eliminate in many cases the difference in behaviour, in knowledge or in future social position. So special classes came into miscredit.

The new generation wants to return to the idea, that every child should go to the same school.

A dedicated teacher may try to adapt to the retarded child. She may succeed to a certain point, since today educational methods have reached a high plane in developing the retarded as well as the normal child. We must recognize this gratefully. In comparison to previous centuries and even decades, progress is overwhelming. It would be unjust not to admit this.

Moreover an almost indefinite great number of "teaching aids" has been invented. They are published and manufactured in every civilised country all over the world. We are thankful for them, because most of them are good, some even excellent. But many of them can be overworked. This means that we have to watch over eager teachers stuffing "academics" down the not very capable child by means of all kinds of "teaching aids." We also have to be careful and honest in observing whether a certain child learns to handle his arithmetic teaching-machine up to a thousand or whether he got a real idea of what happens by adding 2 to 3. The question also arises whether it is educationally sound for the six-year old Downe syndrome child to know his letters if at the same time he starts biting his nails and becomes a terror at home.

Of course we teachers work hard to provide help for the individual problems of the retarded child. However it seems that the more special help such a child receives in the frame work of a regular class, the more he is isolated. If he receives during school hours, according to his need, individual remedial reading lessons, speech-therapy, psycho-motoric exercises and possibly some more other therapies, his experiences in the regular class-room shall be considerably different from those of nondisabled

classmates. His relationships with teachers and peers differs not only in amount but also in kind. Many classroom teachers are ready to help retarded children with academic work, but they are more likely to have social or non-academically oriented interactions with other children. The normal peers describe the handicapped ones as scared, unhappy, worried and undesirable playmates, who must be helped. In the best case they develop a helping behaviour, which could be welcomed by the younger child. However, continued instructions and helping behaviours appeared not to be helpful, but rather meddlesome, intrusive and harmful for the selfconcept of the handicapped.

On the whole, these results are rather disappointing and so many experts insist that retarded children could not withstand the stress of an ordinary school and therefore emphasize the value of placing them in special classes or even in special schools.

Unfortunately an institution--even if it grew out of need--often has the tendency to create new similar needs. The special classes are in danger of overspecialization. In our days in the field of special education there is a considerable proliferation of labels and diagnoses attached to children, who twenty years ago could probably have been described as still normal. Thus we find children with "perceptual handicaps," with "neurological impairments," with "minimal cerebral dysfunction," with "learning disability" and so on. Personally I have some doubt about the educational value of many of these labels. From the educational standpoint it often may be less important what medical diagnosis a certain child has, than the question how his handicaps influence his performance and how we are going to help him to achieve his potential. The fact, that the teachers' personality also must

be taken into consideration, makes answers and decisions even more complex.

Similar disagreement exists in the field of vocational problems. Much emphasis is laid on the provision of competitive jobs. A minority of well-brought up, well-trained, good-natured retarded persons can be fitted into the work process in different branches, mainly as so called "unskilled labor." But for the greater part, work in a sheltered environment proves to be the only possibility. Most of them are glad to have this chance and so are their parents. But others feel that it is a discrimination to work in a sheltered workshop.

The objective of rehabilitation is generally seen in productive activity. But productivity is not an educational principle. It is quite a different matter whether one feels that the development of the person must be in the service of productivity, or if one feels that his achievements should serve his development. For the retarded individual only the second possibility is valid. If one ranks productivity as the guiding principle in life, then the mentally handicapped is degraded into serving as a tool, and this can become inhuman. History presents plenty of examples of this.

In spite of these reservations, there is no doubt, that for the adult retarded only an employment-oriented occupation can be considered meaningful. Only then can the retarded feel accepted in society, and be happy to fill a position which allows them to make a useful contribution. By the way, nowadays we seem to need to overcome the idea that if you are unable to engage in gainful employment, there is no purpose in living.

On the field of recreation we try hard to provide them the same possibilities as for non-handicapped persons. Does this really mean relaxing leisure-time for retarded persons? Since they can fashion neither

their social contacts nor their leisure time on their own, arrangements must be made for them. And so we organize recreational activities, we offer a great variety. Are we sure that all of them are happy about it? Are we sure that most of the retarded young men like to play base-ball? That most of the retarded girls wish to have sexual contacts? Do most of them wish to go regularly once a week to a dancing party or to the swimming pool?

We must not expect that the retarded adult will apply himself fully to whatever we have suggested or started. Normal adults won't do that either. There are times when we just want to be lazy. The retarded adult also needs to have some time for himself, especially if he has finished a full day's work. Besides, it is possible that he does not want to have someone peeking over his shoulder. Let us respect this wish, even when we are quite sure that his activity will lead to nothing. Every person has the right to be by himself occasionally. This right is often denied for the retarded, because we are so afraid of isolation. Of course they have to be stimulated spiritually, mentally and physically. But still we should remember, that even the handicapped person has the right not to be educated from time to time.

Discussion also centers on the question as to <u>where retarded persons should live</u>. We all feel that it is normal for children to live with their families or at least in a family-like setting. But under which circumstances is a group family-like?

Most of us agree that it is normal for adults to live apart from their family. But some of the institutions became too big and ceased to be homely places. So in some countries the transfer of retarded persons into smaller

institutions or even into private foster-homes started. However, it is still an open question as to whether the quality of a residential institution really depends mainly on its size.

In my country, in Switzerland, the main characteristic of residential institutions is their size: ninety percent have less than one hundred residents, half of the institutions take 8 to 50 persons. Yet not all of them are equally good and the smallest ones are not always the best ones. An institution with ten retarded persons of different age, in charge of a dedicated couple seems to be an ideal setting. Unfortunately this is not always true. The quality of the home depends on the personality of the couple and also of the help they receive from outside. What father and mother could raise ten healthy children alone? Not one. A mini-institution cannot care well for handicapped residents unless a variety of services is available.

The danger of large institutions is mass housing, mass feeding, mass recreation, mass teaching (if any). The danger of small institutions is the lack of adequate staff (the special educator cleans the house or the cleaning person serves as educator), lack of special services, lack of therapy and often also lack of sympathy of neighbours. An institution of over a thousand residents can be an impersonal, overcrowded, inhuman place; but it also can be a happy community with the pulsing life of a prosperous village, where everybody can find what he needs. On the other hand a small group-home for six retarded persons can be a pleasant family-like place; but it also can be a ghetto, where handicapped persons live out their lives without stimulation.

There are many more questions involved. The mentally retardeds are a remarkably diverse group with a vast variety of impairments. What fits one, does not fit others. Moreover the retarded person does not want to be different from others. But he feels that he is, and in the interest of his happiness we must give him the possibility to be different. At the same time, we must try to prevent isolation and therefore give him the possibility to be like others. If we can bring these two necessities into harmony with each other, if we can find the golden mean, then we shall find the way that will lead our retarded fellow-men to a happy life in human dignity.